

Gilles Desmedy

Mr. President,

The birth of Bangladesh was rooted in the thwarted democratic aspirations of the people of erstwhile East Pakistan. West Pakistan's denial of a legitimate electoral victory to the Awami League, led by the Late Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, was followed by one of the most brutal genocides of the last century. Pakistan's armed forces, supported by the Jamaat e Islami party and the Al Badr, laid waste to erstwhile East Pakistan, murdering and raping, and targeting Bengali intellectuals. From the carnage was born the free and independent nation of Bangladesh.

The testimony of those days has been carefully documented from the families of survivors and the survivors themselves. And it is this testimony that has provided the basis for the International War Crimes Trials currently underway in Bangladesh. The entire global human rights community that cherishes democracy must pay tribute to the courage of Bangladesh's present Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Late Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, for attempting to provide closure to her people for the traumas suffered before their country became independent.

The secular, intellectual, democratic ethos is very much part of the Bangla psyche. It is therefore not surprising that Bangladesh was the first Muslim majority country that witnessed street demonstrations against fundamentalist groups represented by the Jamaat e Islami and a newer organization the Hefazaat. For the still-living leadership of the Jamaat e Islami Bangladesh is a constant reminder of how this fundamentalist party participated in the massacre of its own people. The sentences passed on the leadership by the Tribunal are more than justified and it is absolutely astounding that there are those that question the manner of judicial proceedings to try and cast doubt on the verdicts. In any western country people who had willingly participated in genocide of their own people would not only be pariahs but possibly hunted down like animals. The examples are many.

The secular, democratic traditions of Bangladesh are today facing a major challenge from the fundamentalists of the Jamaat e Islami and its associated formations. Street violence at which the Jamaat excels has led to considerable destruction and it is sad to see a mainstream political party like the Bangladesh National Party making common cause with them simply to secure power. In the process the very oppression of minorities that one witnesses in Pakistan is being undertaken in Bangladesh with Ahmediyas and Hindus deliberately targeted. It goes to the credit of Shiekh Hasina that she has declared that her vision for Bangladesh is one of a secular, liberal democracy quite distinct from the oppressive theocratic state that, like in Pakistan, the fundamentalists want to impose in the name of religious tenets.

Mr. Chairman, the growth of madrassas in Bangladesh is a major danger to the Awami League's dream of ensuring development, modernization and progress in a liberal environment. The nature of education imparted in madrassas is evident in Pakistan. Gender discrimination, discrimination against other faiths, an ideology of hatred characterizes the products of madrassas. The evidence is very much available in Pakistan, where the state is cognizant of the

dangers that such education poses to progress and development but is helpless since it did not nip the problem in the bud. Many writers in Pakistan lament the wrong policies of successive administrations. Bangladesh can be spared the same fate only if the polity is geared to ensure that fundamentalism is not allowed to sink in deep roots. Only an administration committed to secularism, gender equality, religious tolerance and non-discrimination can achieve this objective and ensure that the country remains on the path of sustainable development utilizing all the human resources at its disposal and not segregating society into acceptable and non- acceptable. Such a polity can never be fashioned by those who have no qualms about pandering to fundamentalist elements in the pursuit of power.

The Jamaat e Islami has created a violent student wing called the Islami Chhatra Shibir. It was known as the Pakistan Islami Chattra Shangha before the Liberation war of Bangladesh and members of this group led the formation of Al-Badr that was involved in the 1971 killing of Bengali intellectuals. According to the Bangladesh media and I quote from the Dhaka Tribune "Activists of this organization extort money from the students of many educational institutions, hostel residents and traders of neighboring areas in the name of Baitul Mal (party fund)". They also pressurize the students to sign the supporter's document of the organization as well as to join the organization. This student group is also involved in violent clashes with other student groups, is extremely militant and has been linked to numerous acts of violence. The group has also been linked to a number of larger terrorist organizations both in Bangladesh, and internationally. Officials and news sources have commented that the group is nothing more than a recruiting ground for Bangladeshi terrorist groups such as Harakat ul-Jihad-i-Islami and Jamaat ul Mujahedin. This student wing has also been responsible for many of the attacks against the minorities in Bangladesh. A developing country that needs to concentrate on providing basic political, economic and social rights to its people is being forced to divert resources to fight off a challenge akin to the challenge fundamentalists pose to the secular, liberal strata of Pakistan's society. Bangladesh had made a mark with its programmes for women's empowerment especially through its micro financing schemes and substantial budget allocations for education. The benefits that have accrued to the women and girls of Bangladesh will be the first to vanish under any regime backed by the fundamentalist parties.

There is need today, given the very obvious evidence of what fundamentalism does to nations and people, for the global human rights and democratic community to provide full support to the current government in Bangladesh to move ahead with its non- discriminatory programmes of development and to ensure that the people of Bangladesh are never again subjected to fundamentalist inspired oppression as they were in 1971. We, gathered here, must assist in every way possible the efforts of the present government to bring the culprits of the genocide of 1971 to justice and thereby set an example that the human rights community would not condone any pursuit of power through the oppressive use of religion.

Thank you all.